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THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE BY COLLEGE-STUDENTS.*

BY THE EDITOR.

We have before us two facts : (1) The college does not provide for instruction in the Bible. For reasons which at present seem sufficient, this department of work, great and growing as it is, finds no place in the curriculum of study. The study of the Bible, if it is to be studied at all by those in attendance upon college, must be an *outside* work. (2) A fair proportion of the students in all our colleges are professing Christians ; and this proportion is increasing. Of those who profess to be Christians, a number,—it is a matter for regret that the number is not larger,—have shown in various ways, and especially by their connection with the College Y. M. C. A. work, that they desire to grow in a knowledge of the Scriptures. It is not the purpose of all these men to become ministers ; and those whose purpose it is do not choose to postpone such work as Bible-study until they are prepared to enter the theological seminary, where real Bible-study is perhaps almost as much neglected as in college. These are men from whom every profession and almost every branch of business will gain recruits. They are, moreover, men who in time will rank highest in the business or the profession which they shall choose. Upon them will be laid great social, political and financial responsibilities. They cannot look forward to a future time for an opportunity to prosecute such study without interruption. It is a present and a pressing duty.

These are the facts ; and the question we are to consider is, The study of the Bible by these men, outside of regular college-work, yet during the college-course. Let us look at the question from four points of view :—

1. *How much can be done?* On account of his regular duties the student cannot, in the very nature of the case, *give much time* to this work ; but in view of the mental discipline gained in the performance of these duties, and the habits of study which characterize his college-life, he should expect to accomplish large results.

It is frequently asked why ministers, who make it their profession to study and to teach the Bible, do not accomplish more in this their professional line. And ministers themselves, many of them, confess that they do not do “ what is expected of them, what ought to be expected of them, and what they ought to expect of themselves.” There may be many reasons ; but the chief one is this : They have lost their habits of study. They do not remain students. The exceptions, to be sure, are many ; but in far too large a majority of cases, regular, systematic, rigid study has been dropped, and, consequently, vigor of mind has gradually been lost. How many ministers at the age of fifty, an age at which they should be able to do the best work of their lives, are dead intellectually !

With the college-student, on the other hand, it is different ; nor is it a matter of choice. He is compelled to study. His mind is, of necessity, active. Much

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can be done in a time comparatively short. At no later period in his life, will acquisition be so easy. His memory is at its best; his judgment, though not yet in all respects matured, is generally reliable. Everything considered, he is in the best possible condition for intellectual work—is it necessary to say that the study of the Bible is intellectual work?—and the time given to the study under consideration, though short, should be made to count.

But farther; the amount accomplished will vary largely with the kind of work attempted, the spirit with which the work is done, the method employed, and the guidance under which it is performed. In some lines of biblical study, and these generally are the most important, progress is slow. With a lukewarm spirit, little can be expected. By some methods one moves, perhaps; but the movement is backward and not forward. There are guides, who in the end prove to be false guides; leaders who turn out to be *mis*-leaders. Yet, under ordinary circumstances, and in spite of difficulties of all kinds, much should be accomplished; and if much is not accomplished, it may at once be surmised that something somewhere is wrong. Given men of average ability, with average methods, with fair spirit, with correct guidance, and even with limited time at their disposal, there should be, and there will be, *results*.

Another item, at this point, deserves consideration. Students enter college with some knowledge of the Scriptures. It is difficult for men, in this age, to read even the secular papers without gaining some ideas concerning the Bible. Many men have had some Bible-training when children, a training which, if well performed, continues to have its influence throughout life.

It is, on the other hand, also true that, among those graduating from our highest institutions, men are to be found whose ignorance of the Bible, its facts and its methods, is indeed lamentable. College-graduates have entered the divinity school who could only with greatest difficulty give information as to whether Abraham lived before Moses, or Moses before Abraham; who could not indicate within five hundred years the date of King David; who had heard of a Saul, and a Paul, but in some way had confounded the two names. *These are facts*. But such ignorance is exceptional. The average man enters Freshman with some basis on which to build. His knowledge is hazy; it must be made clear and definite. His ideas of the Bible are, perhaps, very crude; they must be matured and embellished. The Bible, to him, is an incomprehensible medley of story and law; it must be analyzed, and the relations of these elements to each other pointed out. It abounds in what appear to him to be inexplicable difficulties; he must learn those great underlying principles, a knowledge of which will enable him to see the superficial, insignificant character of these difficulties. It is, for him, a book to be handled carefully, and that, on but one day in seven; he must learn to treat it as an *every-day* book, and to handle it more often than any other book. Or, perhaps it is a lofty, unapproachable thing, to be regarded from without with superstitious awe, a thing to be worshiped,—in short, a fetich; he must learn that it is not only divine, but *human*; not only given by God, but written by men, and for men. Is it not a great mistake of our day, especially among the most consecrated Christian workers, to ignore the human element in Scripture? All this, and much more, ought to be and can be accomplished during a college-course.

2. *What kind of work shall be done?* It is the chief object of all kinds of Christian work to convey gospel truth to those who are out of Christ. That work which does not bear, directly or indirectly, upon this end may be considered

useless. It is the great aim of the Bible-student, so to study the Bible, so to master its contents, as to make it of the greatest possible value to himself, and himself the most efficient worker possible in advancing the cause of divine truth in the world.

In working out this purpose, it is necessary first of all that a student or Christian worker shall have a spiritual grasp of the Scriptures; he must have that familiarity with certain portions, that personal experience of certain truths, which will enable him to make practical use of the same in the hand-to-hand work of the street or the inquiry-room. A man's strength in Christian work is measured largely by his ability to make this use of Scripture truth. This kind of work is, of all kinds, the most practical and the most essential. It is a work for which, in preparation, years of study and prayer and, often, many seasons of affliction are needed. It is not to be obtained at once. It does not come with the memorizing of verses here and there; or with the repetition of a few selected exhortatory sentences. It is the highest of all possessions; the deepest of all knowledge. It will come in time to the child of God, but to him only, and only in time. The training-classes of the College Y. M. C. A. have done and are doing a great work in this line. The fruit of it is apparent to all. We can only pray that the work may continue, and the results be still greater.

But is there not among some, and particularly among those who have done this work and profited by it most, a feeling that it is not *all* that is wanted, that something additional is needed? Are men that have been trained to do the most thorough work, as college-men have been trained, satisfied with a kind of Bible-work which, although from one point of view the deepest, is from another superficial? There is no contradiction here. What in one sense is deep may in another sense be of the surface. It is, or aims to be, deep spiritually; while intellectually it is confessedly and necessarily too often superficial.

For the uneducated man, the undisciplined mind, this is sufficient. It is, indeed, the only kind of work he is capable of doing. A man who has never been taught to think or to do close reasoning must stop here. But it is otherwise with the college-student. His mind is awake to every difficulty. If he is a student, questions will continually present themselves which he must have answered. Questionings begin, and they will most certainly lead to doubt and scepticism, if they are not met, if the principles which explain them are not set forth. That man is not a student who does not ask: "Why is this? When was that?" If one accustomed to ask these questions, and to have them answered, in reference to subjects outside the Bible, does not ask them in reference to the Bible, one of two things must be true: His interest in the Bible, like the seed sown on stony ground, will be short-lived, for it has not taken root; or, his conception of the Bible is so shallow, so imperfect, so erroneous, as to render his Christian life and ministrations of no permanent value. The student, it may be repeated, if he be a student, will think; he will inquire; he will investigate; he will know all that is to be known, so far as his circumstances will allow the acquisition of this knowledge.

And so we appeal for a kind of Bible-study on the part of college-men which, in some respects, will be different from that which hitherto has generally been in vogue. We do not make this appeal with any desire to see the other kind of study slighted. It is needed and must continue; but it is not all that is needed.

The appeal is made with the belief, and indeed the knowledge, that college

men have themselves felt the necessity of this thing. Of the man who receives the advantages of an education much more is expected than of him who is denied this privilege. It is but fair, then, to expect college-men, while in college, to form habits of study, to gain methods of work in the realm of the Bible which shall, in time, fit them for the highest and best kind of biblical study. If the college-student is not to do this, of whom, pray, is it to be expected? This work, intended, we repeat, not to supersede, but to supplement and strengthen that now being done, may, for want of a better term, be called intellectual work. The term critical would be more appropriate, but it is liable to be misunderstood. Its detailed description must be brief.

1. It would be an *historical* work, including a mastery, so far as possible, of the details of Bible-history; a putting together of this and that event; an investigation of the great epochs; a study of the great characters; an inquiry into the causes of things as they are represented in Scripture and in their relations to each other.

2. It would be a *literary* work, including the study of the literary form of the various books; the question of their authorship and date; the circumstances under which they had their origin; the purpose they were intended to subserve; the people for whom they were originally written; their history.

3. It would be a work of *interpretation*, including an application of those great principles common to the interpretation of all writings; and, in addition, the study of those special principles demanded by the unique character of the Bible; a going down beneath the surface, a searching after things deep and hidden; an investigation of prophecy; a study of the divine plan for the redemption of man, as it began, and developed, and was finally accomplished in the life, work and death of the Christ.

It is for work of this kind,—critical, to be sure, yet necessary to a conservation of the truth; intellectual, yet forming the basis of the deepest spiritual work,—that we appeal.

3. *With what spirit shall this work be done?* If, now, such work as this should commend itself, and should be undertaken, it may not be out of place to consider the spirit with which it should be performed; for this is vital. A bad work, with bad methods, but with good spirit, often succeeds. A work, good or bad, with bad methods, but good spirit, generally succeeds. While a good work, with good methods, but with the wrong spirit, generally fails. The first thing is to satisfy ourselves that the work proposed is a good work. Next in importance is the spirit. Last of all comes the method.

1. The spirit must be a *reverent* one. In this day of flippant and often blasphemous criticism, reverence is a thing to be cultivated. Perhaps, it is thought, this caution is not needed. Of those who have sufficient interest in the Bible to study it, a reverential spirit would be expected. But it must be confessed that, in the kind of work which has been referred to, there is a danger of losing, to some extent, that reverence for the Sacred Volume which the other kind of study increases. In the critical handling of the book a liberty is taken, a familiarity is gained, that seems, in the case of some, to destroy the feeling of respect and awe, which, from one point of view, ought to characterize the student's attitude toward the Holy Book. Now, so far as this study destroys that *Bible-worship* of which so many Christians are unconsciously guilty, it is well. There are those who treat the Bible as they would treat an idol. It is

regarded by them with a superstitious, sanctimonious feeling, as a kind of charm. This is a use for which the Sacred Book was never intended; and one great result to be accomplished by the kind of work here advocated is the removal of this unfounded and mischievous idea. True reverence for divine truth, and proper regard for the instrument through which that truth has been revealed are quite a different thing. These must be cultivated.

2. The spirit must be the *historical* spirit. Before college-men this point scarcely needs expansion. It is the truth we seek; and this truth, when found, we should be ready to accept at whatever cost. It is a sore trial to have ideas with which we have been familiar from our infancy shown to be erroneous. It is most difficult to put aside the prejudices which years have hardened. Yet the former will take place, and the latter must take place, if the historical spirit is to have sway. This historical spirit is one of slow acquisition. To do what it requires seems, at first, like parting with one's dearest treasures. It cannot be acquired without a struggle. But of all men, college-men should be the foremost in seeking it, the most careful in its application, and its staunchest defenders when it is assailed.

3. The spirit must be an *independent* one. "That student makes no *real* progress who is satisfied with having learned what some one else has said concerning the meaning of a verse, or the scope of a passage; who always *follows*, who is always *leaning upon* another. Such a student crams; he does not digest. His work is done for the moment; not for all time. He examines only results; never the processes leading to the results. The fact is, he does not do *honest* work. And yet all the world knows that the knowledge which does not come by honest work does not stay; it may indeed be said never to have come. This explains the multitude of failures under the present Sunday-school system, admirable as it is. Many students, strangely enough, suppose that they need only read the 'notes' published in any sheet, or perhaps only the 'practical lessons' suggested, and they will in time come to know the Bible. Partly because these 'notes' are, in so many cases, the merest *trash*, and partly because even when most excellent they are not properly studied, the Bible-student who feels that the preparation of his Sunday-school lesson is all the Bible-study which he need undertake, who is satisfied to study the lesson as he would be ashamed to study a college-lesson, in too many cases,—makes an out-and-out failure."* Crutches are freely furnished us in these days,—so freely, indeed, that too many of us have forgotten how to stand on our feet. The spirit of independent investigation, a habit for the development of which the entire college-system is intended, must be cultivated. The world needs independent thinkers, men who have the ability to determine *for themselves* whether a certain thing is, or is not; and these men must come largely from the ranks of college-men.

There are other characteristics of the spirit which should attend this work, but space forbids any enlargement of this point.

4. By what *method* shall this work be done? Having considered the amount of work, the kind of work, and the spirit of the work, it only remains for us briefly to take up the method of the work. No two men will do the same thing best, in the same way. Each man must work largely by his own method. A method helpful to one man, or set of men, might be ruinous to another man, or set of

* February (1886) STUDENT, p. 274.

men. Independence not only of spirit, but as well of method,—of any and every method,—is a thing to be sought after. A constant effort should be made to keep out of the ruts. Yet, after all, there must be a plan of work. He who works without plan and aimlessly will find his results without form and void—chaotic. A poor method is better than no method; but in making a selection it is wise to choose the best.

1. First, the method should be one consistent with methods employed by the student in similar college-work. If the method employed is essentially different, it must mean either that the college-methods are wrong, or that the subject handled is of such a nature as to *demand* a different method. Neither of these suppositions can be maintained. College-methods are the embodiment of centuries of experience and wisdom, and are, in general, correct. The Bible is a book to be studied as other books. Each writer has peculiarities of style, of diction, which need to be understood. Isaiah's usage of words, syntax and style, is to be taken up in precisely the same manner as one would deal with Homer, or Horace. His exact meaning is as dependent upon a knowledge of his times and circumstances as is that of any classical writer on his times and his circumstances. There are, it is true, some special principles to which reference has in part been made, viz., the element of the supernatural, of miracle, of prophecy. But so far as it goes, the method adopted in the study of Homer or Horace is the method to be adopted in the study of Isaiah or Paul.

2. Our method must be one which will be disciplinary in its influence; it must be one which will train the mind and keep it trained. For, if it does not help, it will injure the mind. Good habits of study, if already acquired, should be strengthened by it. Bad habits should be corrected. How many men expend the same amount of mental energy in the preparation of a Bible-lesson as in preparation for a college-recitation? In the latter, it is work; in the former, too often, at the best half-work. This is all wrong. Our method of work should be one which will demand the same rigid, unflinching effort required by college-tasks, the only difference being that in the former case the effort is to be a voluntary one, while in the latter it is compulsory.

3. It must be a method which will lead to *definite results*. When one has finished a course of study in any department, he will surely be disappointed and dissatisfied with the subject, his teacher and himself, if he is not able to put his hands on certain definite results. Now, the Bible is a small book. It consists of a definite number of separate books, each of which has its place in the canon for a certain purpose. It is, we all believe, an inexhaustible book; and yet the work of mastering this book is, in one sense, a very definite one. With a plan of study looking towards thorough work and definite results, the facts, the purpose, the teachings of book after book will come into our possession; one principle after another will become familiar; one period of history after another will gradually develop itself before us. But to accomplish this, the method must itself be definite and indicate definite work.

4. It must be a *logical* method. If it teach a list of events without also teaching the relation of these events to each other, it will not answer. If it take a verse here and a passage there, without considering that verse in the light of its context, it will not answer. If it attempt to exhaust the meaning of a verse, without first a study of the chapter of which the verse is a part; or of a chapter, without first a study of the book of which the chapter is a part, it will not answer. There must

be consecution, connection, logical order. A method which lacks this characteristic will scarcely satisfy men whose whole lives have been given to work of this character.

5. Finally, the method must be as comprehensive as possible. Mastery of details is needed, yet also mastery of the subject as a whole. "It is a mistake to suppose, for a moment, that Bible-study consists in the *study of isolated texts*; or in the study of single chapters; or even in the study of entire books. A man might study *verses* all his life and know comparatively little of the Bible. Besides, the man who studies only *verses* does one-sided, imperfect, narrow work. As has been said, he who does not have in mind the entire book, and from this stand-point do his work, does not and cannot appreciate the full force of a single verse contained in that book. The same thing holds good in a higher sphere. It is not sufficient merely to have gained a comprehensive knowledge of a given book. Although we may know the contents, the analysis, the occasion, purpose, author, etc., etc., of this book, there is still something to be ascertained. What? The place of that book in the Bible as a whole; its relation to other books; the relation of its contents to the contents of the entire Bible, to the entire plan of God for the salvation of man. How comparatively contemptible, after all, is the study of mere verses! How much he loses who satisfies himself that, having done this, he has done all! We should be close, critical, accurate students of a *verse*; we should be searching, analytical, systematizing students of a *book*; we should also be broad, comprehensive, general students of the Bible."* Let our method, therefore, whatever else it is, be a comprehensive one.

The time has come for a more careful consideration of the question of Bible-study by college-students than it has ever yet received. In all its varied work, the College Y. M. C. A. has no department so important. Our age calls for broader and deeper work in this line; and the responsibility for this work rests largely upon college-men.

An attempt has been made to embody the points here presented in an "outline study." This "study" may serve in a feeble way to illustrate what we think might with profit be done with every book of the Bible. It will serve also, though perhaps in a still more feeble way, to show the kind of work which, from the stand-point here taken, college-students ought to do. In this outline† no place is given to the practical and spiritual work for which the Book of Exodus, the book chosen, is so admirably suited. The insertion of this element did not come within the scope of the task here undertaken. Such work, however, is not to be omitted; and it would seem quite certain that, as a result of work something like that which is here proposed, the practical and spiritual elements would be much more easily found and much more wisely employed.

* May ('86) STUDENT, p. 377.

† See pages 203-208 of this number.